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GEORGIOS

WEDGWOOD WARE AND ITS CREATORS.



THE exquisite Wedgwood Jasper ware is now the delight of connoisseurs and the mania of collectors, although not so many years ago it was the refuse of auction-rooms and plaything of children. "My wares need only to be scarce to be considered beautiful," Josiah Wedgwood wrote, as if with prophetic vision of our day when lovely

objects that he gladly sold for pence and shillings would be greedily bought for pounds by a generation with artistic teeth on edge for the sour fruits of bad taste eaten by their fathers—the bad taste which has made these exquisite gems of ceramic art so rare.

Josiah Wedgwood was born in 1730 in Staffordshire. He came of a race of potters, and first saw the light among the tall chimneys of a potters' town. He took to the trade of his father at seven years, and threw pots from the wheel at that age as naturally as other boys throw snowballs. He was of an inventive turn of mind from his cradle and of an experimental habit. Likewise had he a strong strain of that practical sort of ideality which reaches out to tangible shapes of beauty rather than inward to dreams and visions. All of Wedgwood's life, of nearly seventy years, was devoted to experiments, inventions, and artistic triumphs in his beloved art. He found the potter's craft in England a vulgar one, served by rude laborers and ranking socially with the lowest manual trades; he left it elevated to the sphere of the fine arts, and as direct an outlet for artistic feeling as are pictures, poems, or statues.

It was not, however, until his fame had gone all over the world and he had made his famous "queen's ware," magnificently shaped and decorated, the pride of Queen Charlotte's and Catharine the Great's tables, that he succeeded in the higher artistic invention for which he had been striving so long. A white biscuit body variously compounded had long been in use in the pottery, and in 1770 Wedgwood turned his attention to improving it by the use of purer clays and other substances.

should possess a porcelain texture, intense whiteness, and ability to give hardness to large and compact masses. He tested the sulphate of baryta. A variety of this, locally called "cawk," was abundant in Derbyshire, and after repeated experiments was found to answer every purpose. The compound seems to have



STATUE OF JOSIAH WEDGWOOD.

AT THE WEDGWOOD MEMORIAL INSTITUTE, BURSLEM.

been, "flint, potters' clay, carbonate of baryta a quarter part, zaffre and sulphate of baryta a sixth part."

One property of this new material was a delightful surprise to its inventor. This was its porosity, by means of which it could absorb metallic oxides, cobalt especially. Hitherto color had been applied by ground-laying enamel colors, but now this laborious and expensive process was revolutionized, and the articles by being simply washed in the solution acquired the desired colors.

The first two vases made from this new Jasper ware were classical in shape,

as was almost everything made afterward. Wedgwood had a genuine love of Hellenic forms, and even had it been otherwise he would scarcely have escaped the prevailing taste of the day, which looked upon everything Gothic as barbaric and believed the line of beauty to be found only in the Roman and Grecian arch. Happily for Wedgwood's success, John

Flaxman, the sculptor, then in the first fresh enthusiasm of his career, was called in to model the bas-reliefs of the Jasper ware. These bas-reliefs were first modelled in wax; a mould was then made from them, in which the uncolored Jasper or a fine biscuit was cast.

Great difficulty was found in attaching these bas-reliefs to the body of the vases. Fired with the vases the delicate white bas-reliefs were apt to absorb a portion of the body color, particularly in the most delicate parts where the biscuit was naturally thinnest. Wedgwood became quite disheartened by this difficulty, and declared there was no way possible but to fire body and decorations separately and then to attach the bas-reliefs by some sort of glue! In some of the Jasper wares this unfortunate necessity has left its mark, but happily it was soon discovered that the dainty busts, figures, arabesques, leaves, scrolls, and flowers could be better attached by being undercut around the edges and then fixed to the ground after the separate firings.

The Jasper ware, of which there are so many beautiful varieties in the museums of London, are of various colors, although the different degrees of cobalt are always the most beautiful. Some are a delicate green, some a soft gray, some a blush-rose pink, some a pale yellow varying from ivory to the color of ripe corn. In quality and character of biscuit, in delicacy and loveliness of body color, in treatment of the most minute and exquisite details of ornamentation—figures chiselled as if from pearl and laid upon flower petals—and in dignified refinement of imaginative conception perhaps nothing known to us among the arts of antiquity surpasses this last, best, and highest triumph of the great potter's genius. Every form known to the best periods of Greek and Roman art is reproduced in this exquisite ware, and decorated with sculptures that might have haunted the imaginations of the Golden Age.

There are beakers like those from which Aspasia must have wet her lips, urns like those that overflowed with rare ripe fruits at Nero's banquets, vases that Hebe might have offered Jove. The decorations were modelled by Flaxman, Pacetti, and others, and have the texture of the finest alabaster. An "expert" in Jasper ware often detects the cleverest imposture by simply passing the finger over the surface of the objects to see if they have the peculiarly velvety feeling of real Jasper ware or not. Chimney-pieces, medallions for wall decoration, mural tablets, portrait cameos, tea services, ornamental tablets, endless fantasies for household decoration, were produced in this most suave and delicate material. The finest cameos were made of it and set for bracelets, ear-rings, girdles, finger-rings. The queen's opera-glass was of the same dainty stuff now known



WEDGWOOD'S JASPER WARE.



MODERN WEDGWOOD WARE. PAINTED BY LESSORE.

He experimented in fusible spas, but complained that he could not work with them without making a noise and thereby betraying his secret processes. He also encountered a difficulty in the discovery that nature makes no two pieces of spa alike, and that one bit would melt into glass while another was as dry as a tobacco-pipe. What he wanted was a substance that

par excellence as "Wedgwood." Gentlemen wore the cameos set as seals; ladies drank their strong bohea from pots and cups sculptured with little figures that might have drifted across a tiny Parthenaic frieze. It was the delight of fashionable society as well as of the artistic world, and it is a strange phase in the artistic history of our century that after having made its invent-

or's fortune, immortalized his name, and filled all England with loveliness, this ware was fated to become "unfashionable," to decline from parlors to kitchens, garrets, and cellars, to be sold in lots at cheap auctions, to be given to children for playthings, and then again



WEDGWOOD JASPER PLAQUE.

to spring to the loftiest heights in cultured esteem, and to absorb great sums from the pockets of collectors!

MARGARET BERTHA WRIGHT.

Josiah Wedgwood was one of those indefatigable men who from time to time spring from the ranks of the common people, and by their energetic character not only practically educate the working population in habits of industry, but by the example of diligence and perseverance which they set before them, largely influence the public activity in all directions, and contribute in a great degree to form the national character. He was, like Arkwright, the youngest of a family of thirteen children. His grandfather and grand-uncle were both potters, as was also his father, who died when he was a mere boy, leaving him a patrimony of twenty pounds. He had learned to read and write at the village school; but on the death of his father he was taken from it and set to work as a "thrower" in a small pottery carried on by his elder brother. There he began life, his working life, to use his own words, "at the lowest round of the ladder," when only eleven years old. He was shortly after seized by an attack of virulent smallpox, from the effects of which he suffered during the rest of his life, for it was followed by a disease in the right knee, which recurred at frequent intervals, and was only got rid of by the amputation of the limb many years later.

Mr. Gladstone, in his eloquent eulogy on Wedgwood delivered some years ago at Burslem, well observed that the disease from which he suffered was not improbably the occasion of his subsequent excellence. "It prevented him from growing up to be the active, vigorous English workman, possessed of all his limbs, and knowing right well the use of them; but it put him upon considering whether, as he could not be that, he might not be something else, and something greater. It sent his mind inward; it drove him to meditate upon the laws and secrets of his art. The result was, that he arrived at a perception and a grasp of them which might, perhaps, have been envied, certainly have been owned, by an Athenian potter."

When he had completed his apprenticeship with his brother, Josiah joined partnership with another workman, and carried on a small business in making knife-hafts, boxes, and sundry articles for domestic use. Another partnership followed, when he proceeded to make melon table-plates, green pickle-leaves, candlesticks, snuff-boxes, and such-like articles; but he made comparatively little progress until he began business on his own account at Burslem in the year 1759. There he diligently pursued his calling, introducing new articles to the trade, and gradually extending his business. What he chiefly aimed at was to manufacture cream-colored ware of a better quality than was then produced in Staffordshire as regarded shape, color, glaze, and durability. To understand the subject thoroughly, he devoted his leisure to the study of chemistry; and he made numerous experiments on fluxes, glazes, and various sorts of clay. Being a close inquirer and accurate observer, he noticed that a certain earth

containing silica, which was black before calcination, became white after exposure to the heat of a furnace. This fact, observed and pondered on, led to the idea of mixing silica with the red powder of the potteries, and to the discovery that the mixture becomes white when calcined. He had but to cover this material with a vitrification of transparent glaze, to obtain one of the most important products of fictile art—that which, under the name of English earthenware, was to attain the greatest commercial value and become of the most extensive utility. Wedgwood was for some time much troubled by his furnaces, though nothing like to the same extent that Palissy was; and he overcame his difficulties in the same way—by repeated experiments and unflinching perseverance. His first attempts at making porcelain for table use were a succession of disastrous failures—the labors of months being often destroyed in a day. It was only after a long series of trials, in the course of which he lost time, money, and labor, that he arrived at the proper sort of glaze to be used; but he would not be denied, and at last he conquered success through patience. The improvement of pottery became his passion, and it was never lost sight of for a moment.

WEDGWOOD JASPER BAS-RELIEF. DESIGNED BY FLAXMAN.
MERCURY UNITING THE HANDS OF ENGLAND AND FRANCE.

Wedgwood was cordially helped by many persons of rank and influence; for, working in the truest spirit, he readily commanded the help and encouragement of other true workers. He made for Queen Charlotte the first royal table-service of English manufacture, of the kind afterward called "queen's ware," and was ap-



WEDGWOOD'S WARE.

pointed Royal Potter; a title which he prized more than if he had been made a baron. Valuable sets of porcelain were intrusted to him for imitation, in which he succeeded to admiration. Sir William Hamilton lent him specimens of ancient art from Herculaneum, of

which he produced accurate and beautiful copies. The Duchess of Portland outbid him for the Barberini Vase when that article was offered for sale. He bid as high as seventeen hundred guineas for it; the duchess secured it for eighteen hundred; but when she learnt Wedgwood's object she at once generously lent him



GROUP FROM THE PORTLAND VASE.

the vase to copy. He produced fifty copies at a cost of about £2500, and his expenses were not covered by their sale; but he gained his object, which was to show that whatever had been done, English skill and energy could and would accomplish.

Wedgwood called to his aid the crucible of the chemist, the knowledge of the antiquary, and the skill of the artist. He found out Flaxman when a youth, and while he liberally nurtured his genius, drew from him a large number of beautiful designs for his pottery and porcelain; converting them by his manufacture into objects of taste and excellence, and thus making them instrumental in the diffusion of classical art among the people. This famous artist, whose contribution to the reputation of the Wedgwood ware is not usually given sufficient prominence—for without his aid the pottery would have lacked its chief artistic qualities—was the son of a humble seller of plaster casts in London. When a child, he was such an invalid that it was his custom to sit behind his father's shop-counter propped by pillows, amusing himself with drawing and reading. Like all youthful efforts, his first designs were crude. The proud father one day showed some of them to Roubilliac the sculptor, who turned from them with a contemptuous "pshaw!" But the boy had the right stuff in him; he had industry and patience; and he continued to labor incessantly at his books and drawings. He then tried his young powers in modelling figures in plaster of Paris, wax, and clay. By dint of patience and perseverance, his drawing improved so much that he obtained a commission from a lady to execute six original drawings in black chalk of subjects in Homer.

At fifteen Flaxman entered as a pupil at the Royal Academy. Notwithstanding his retiring disposition, he soon became known among the students, and great things were expected of him. Nor were their expectations disappointed; in his fifteenth year he gained the silver prize, and the next year he became a candidate for the gold one. Yet he lost it, and the gold medal was adjudged to a pupil who was not afterward heard of. This failure on the part of the youth was really of service to him. "Give me time," said he to his father, "and I will yet produce works that the Academy will be proud to recognize." He redoubled his efforts, spared no pains, designed and modelled incessantly, and made steady if not rapid progress.

Happily, young Flaxman's skill in design had reached the knowledge of Josiah Wedgwood, who sought him out for the purpose of employing him to design improved patterns of china and earthenware. It may seem a humble department of art for such a genius as Flaxman to work in; but it really was not so. An artist may be laboring truly in his vocation while designing a common teapot or water-jug. Articles in daily use among the people, which are before their eyes at every meal, may be made the vehicles of education to all, and minister to their highest culture. The most ambitious artist may thus confer a greater practical benefit on his countrymen

than by executing an elaborate work which he may sell for thousands of pounds, to be placed in some wealthy man's gallery where it is hidden away from public sight. Before Wedgwood's time the designs which figured upon English china and stoneware were hideous both in drawing and execution, and he determined to improve both. Flaxman did his best to carry out the manufacturer's views. He supplied him from time to time with models and designs of various pieces of earthenware, the subjects of which were principally from ancient verse and history. Many of them are still in existence, and some are equal in beauty and simplicity to his after-designs for marble. The celebrated Etruscan vases, specimens of which were to be found in public museums and in the cabinets of the curious, furnished him with the best examples of form, and these he embellished with his own elegant devices. "Stuart's Athens," then recently published, furnished him with specimens of the purest-shaped Greek utensils; of these he adopted the best, and worked them into new shapes of elegance and beauty. Flaxman then saw that he was laboring in a great work—no less than the promotion of popular education; and he was proud, in after-life, to allude to his early labors in this walk, by which he was enabled at the same time to cultivate his love of the beautiful, to diffuse a taste for art among the people, and to replenish his own purse, while he promoted the prosperity of his friend and benefactor.

At length, in 1782, when twenty-seven years of age, he quitted his father's roof, rented a small house and studio in Wardour Street, Soho, and married Ann Denman. Patiently and happily the affectionate couple plodded on during five years in their humble little home in Wardour Street. At length, having accumulated a sufficient store of savings, they set out for Rome. Arrived there, he applied himself diligently to study; maintaining himself, like other poor artists, by making copies from the antique. English visitors sought his studio, and gave him commissions; and it was then that he composed his beautiful designs illustrative of Homer, Æschylus, and Dante. The price paid for them was moderate—only fifteen shillings apiece; but Flaxman worked for art as well as money; and the beauty of the designs brought him other friends and patrons. He executed "Cupid and Aurora" for the munificent Thomas Hope, and the "Fury of Athamas" for the Earl of Bristol. He then prepared to return to England, his taste improved and cultivated by careful study; but before he left Italy the Academies of Florence and Carrara recognized his merit by electing him a member.

His fame had preceded him to London, where he soon found abundant employment. While at Rome he had been commissioned to execute his famous monument in memory of Lord Mansfield, and it was erected in the north transept of Westminster Abbey shortly after his return. It stands there in majestic grandeur, a monument to the genius of Flaxman himself—calm, simple, and severe. No wonder that Banks, the sculptor, then in the heyday of his fame, exclaimed, when he saw it, "This little man cuts us all out!"

When the members of the Royal Academy heard of Flaxman's return, and especially when they had an opportunity of seeing and admiring his portrait-statue of Mansfield, they were eager to have him enrolled among their number. He allowed his name to be proposed in the candidates' list of associates, and was immediately elected. Shortly after he appeared in an entirely new

character. The little boy who had begun his studies behind the plaster-cast-seller's shop-counter in New Street, Covent Garden, was now, a man of high intellect and recognized supremacy in art, to instruct students, in the character of Professor of Sculpture to the



MODERN WEDGWOOD EWER.

MODELLED BY PROTAT AND PAINTED BY LESSORE.

Royal Academy! After a long, peaceful, and happy life, Flaxman found himself growing old. The loss which he sustained by the death of his affectionate wife Ann was a severe shock to him; but he survived her several years, during which he executed his cele-

the work of Flaxman and Wedgwood, and also of the more modern ware made by Wedgwood's successors. The finest specimens of the latter are those painted by Emile Lessore, a talented French artist. After some years at the Sèvres manufactory, Lessore went to England, and was employed by the Wedgwoods from about 1859 until his death in 1876. His works were shown at Paris in 1867 and at Vienna in 1873, and numerous medals were awarded him.

PROPRIETY IN CERAMIC DECORATION.

THE characteristics to be sought in good pottery decoration are, first, appropriateness of subject, an agreeable flow of lines and disposition of masses, effective arrangement with fine quality of color, and lastly, economy of labor, by which is meant, not stint, but wise direction and limitation.

Not many years ago pictorial art became too dignified to condescend to subjects suggested merely by a fanciful and sportive imagination. A picture that did not teach something was a vanity. At the present day many of our best artists maintain that every picture ought to be a decoration; that the lesson it conveys, the ability with which its story is told—by mastery of expression, light and shade, drawing and arrangement—are matters of secondary importance, the question of real importance being whether it is finely colored, and has a decorative effect when hung upon the walls of such an apartment as the painter would have selected for its reception. The truth lies, probably, between the two extremes. Neither gravely truthful nor brightly fanciful art can be surrendered; and painting on pottery—quite unsuited to the former—is peculiarly well adapted for the latter, requiring both taste and invention in coloring and design, in the place of fidelity to nature. Excluding serious and painful or repulsive subjects, every field is open to the painter on pottery. All that is demanded is a conventionalized treatment, varied according to his purpose, either to produce a decorative picture on a flat surface, such as panels of vases, or plaques—i.e., slabs of soft porcelain or earthenware—or to decorate an object having a concave or convex surface. Mr. Ruskin justifies certain eccentricities of the figures in Turner's pictures, observing that when composing a grand landscape we may twist about the forms and proportions of human beings as we do hills, trees, buildings, and other components of the scene. To the decorator, accurate perspective, strict observance of the relative sizes of objects, truth of color, and exactness of form are considerations of minor importance. His first care is to secure a good general effect,

by skilful disposition of light and dark, or by balanced spaces of beautiful color. At one time he may arrest attention by some startling contrast, at others he will affect the eye with pleasurable sensations by means which cannot be discriminated without attentive examination.

For strictly decorative treatment a clear outline should mark out each important component of the picture, and strong light and shade, as well as all attempts to convey an impression of distance by effects of aerial perspective, should be avoided.

Shadows are entirely out of place in pure ornament; but, for decorative pictures, some indulgence may be claimed for their use—not so much to assist in expressing form as to give agreeable variations of color. Their absence is, perhaps, less felt when the coloring is rich and strong than when it is in a light key.



MODERN WEDGWOOD WARE. INCLUDING LESSORE'S "EUROPA" PLATEAU.

brated "Shield of Achilles," and his noble "Archangel Michael Vanquishing Satan"—perhaps his two greatest works.*

The illustrations given herewith present examples of

* This sketch of the careers of Wedgwood and Flaxman is abridged from Samuel Smiles's "Self-Help."—Ed. A. A.